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The Love Story of Ursula Wolcott

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Being a Tale in Verse of the Time of the GREAT
REVIVAL IN NEW ENGLAND. Written
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To their first reader
these traditions of Ursula Wolcott
are dedicated

Preface to the Reader

IN good time Roger, the son of Simon Wolcott and Martha Pitkin, was married. His thirteenth child, Ursula Wolcott, was born at Windsor, Connecticut (now South Windsor), 30th October, 1724. In 1741 her father became Chief Justice of the Superior Court, and in later years a Major-General and Governor.

Ursula married her second cousin Matthew Griswold of Lyme 11th November, 1743, and died 5th April, 1788. The story here related is true, both as to the lady who would "wait a little" and in fact waited a life-time, and also as to the scene on the stairs. Ursula's husband and her son Roger Griswold were Governors of Connecticut, as were her father, brother, and nephew.





U WAS URSULA whose gentle
tread

Bore round the broad-rimmed
wheel of oak

That whirled, and hung, and
whirled again,

As though she timed it with her heart.

And when it stopped, her fingers ran

Over the spokes until it whirled,

A moment hung, and whirled again.

And while the distaff loosed the flax
That slipped between her hands she sang :

While I sit here, while I sing,
Spinning, spinning, spinning,
Soars the skylark on its wing,
Soaring upward ring on ring,
Spinning, spinning, spinning.

While my fingers busy are,
Spinning, spinning, spinning,
Comes a horseman from afar,
Comes by valley, cliff and scar,
Spinning, spinning, spinning.

And as she turned and looked without
She pouted playfully and said :
“ 'T is only Cousin Matthew comes.”

The ancient Windsor elms that arched
The village highway promised peace
To all who passed beneath their boughs ;
And he, sitting upon his horse, —

Unurged those many leagues behind, —
Had more of peace that April day
Than for a twelvemonth he had known.

“ You drive too madly for a Turk,
Too slowly for an Englishman,”
A laughing voice accosted him.
“ He is so awkward, so confused
By every girl,” she sighed ; and he,
Recovering at length, replied :
“ Then am I fit, Miss Ursula,
To drive your mother’s spinning-wheel ? ”
“ A woman’s task is not so light
That any man can come to it
With fingers hardened at the plow.”

While I sit and turn the wheel,
Spinning, spinning, spinning,
Some one brave and some one leal,
Some one strong will come and kneel,
While I’m spinning, spinning.

“ Now, Cousin Matthew, sit no more
So moody in a corner there ;
If you are brave then you should kneel.”
And when her lips had spoken thus
Her heart repented for the words,
Since wounded love had come to brood
Above him, as the thrush torn-winged
Croons ceaselessly on some low bough.
“ Dear Cousin Matthew,” she exclaimed,
And then she knew not how to speak ;
But in the little hand she laid
Across his hard and sunburned palm
There was a bond of sympathy
That warmed him toward her gentleness.
“ I ’m going there no more,” he said,
Half gladly, half regretfully,
Raising his eyes and looking down
The southern road. “ It ’s ended now.
How many times, since she and I
Danced that first night, my heart has turned

To her ; how many times my thought
Has builded castles in these woods
And meadows where we two might live.
Ah, Ursula, if any man
Loves you as I have worshipped her
These hopeless yet too happy years,
You could not but be merciful
To such a heart.

But she? She is
So beautiful, so cold, so wise !
All through the autumn afternoons
I've followed down the river's shore
To be with her, to hear her voice,
To look within her eyes for some
Love-token ; Cousin Ursula,
She could not love, she does not know
What love should be ; she only knows
That women marry ; she is wise.
I've placed her beauty in the stars
And knelt to her. I've taken her

Into my heart, and only asked
A little love, a little love.
And every time she answered me
With all the sweetness that is hers,
With all the freshness on her lips :
'Wait, Matthew, wait; be patient, dear,
And give me just a little time.' "

His words that came unwillingly
In other days, forged hot and sere
Like sparks struck out beneath the iron.
And Ursula sat breathless, cowed
Beneath resentment stern and deep,
Stirred from his long enduring soul.
"Yes, Ursula," he said, "she hoped
To keep me subject till she knew
Another would not make her his,
And then she would have thrown to me
A rose he would not stoop to wear.
I stood before her with my hat
Clutched tight between my finger-nails.

‘What shall your answer be?’ I said.
‘A little time, good Matthew, please,’
She sighed; I bowed and answered her:
‘A lifetime you shall have; good-day.’
And having spoken, left her there.”

A hush came over all the room;
The spinning-wheel no longer moved,
And Ursula, wide-eyed and awed,
Looked steadfastly at Matthew’s face;
Then like the breaking of a storm
Fell forward sobbing on her wheel.
Matthew in silence rose and stood
A moment like an awkward child,
And then went quietly away.



HE morning sun climbed silently
The hidden slopes that face the
sea,
While all the woodland sweep to
west

Was shrouded deep in night. And she,
With eyes awaiting day, slept on,
Her cheek upon her bended arm,
Which held at bay the surge of pink
That trembled round the disk of snow

Its impress made, and rioted
Out to her very finger-tips.
But when the sun had reached the dawn
It broke, running in myriad ways
Like golden ripples through the world.
It tinged the leaves, it warmed the buds,
It pierced with fire the river's heart.
Then through her lashes one by one
It sought the cradle of her eyes
And whispered that the day was come.
She sighed a very little then,
And smiled and opened wide her eyes,
And said so softly that the sound
Echoed between her parted lips :
“ He will not go to her again.”
So all that day upon the stairs
And through the hall there swept a low
Sweet voice attuned between her joy
And his distress.

At night she walked

Along the path that wandered out
Uncertainly to meet the road.
She stooped to pluck some sturdy weed
That hid a timid Mayflower's head,
And raised her eyes now west now east
To scan the home-turned laborers.
Her Cousin Matthew lingered on
Until his men had passed along,
And then came toward her with a step
That told his weariness. For him
The turning furrow covered in
The sere and withered foliage
That touched with life the former spring.
His steady hand upon the plow
Felt stronger that the past should lie
Beneath the soil, enriching it.
For these immortal tyrannies —
The pains that search the mystery
Of hope, of longing and despair —
We call them sorrows to be shunned

Till we have suffered, then are they
The sources of a patient joy.

They walked together under trees
Whose branches held the lingering sun
That streaked the purple shadow forms
Beneath with labyrinths of light.

And as it reddened on the rim
The purples sobered into green
And blended with the coming night.

Her silent presence rested him.

Her instinct equalled all his years.

'T was not the movement of an arm,
Or shadow 'neath a wave of hair,

Or haunting rhythm of a word,

For these were hers ; but he had found

Her noiseless figure by his side

An all-pervading influence.

At last they spoke of planting time,

The barley sowed, the fence repaired

That circled with its rails the field ;

And hayseed ready to be sowed
And flaxseed for the nearing June.

The uneventful summer days
Hung shrouded in a maze of heat
That warmed the slow maturing grain.
And when the tassels turned to gold
The reapers stood and flashed the flint
Upon their scythes, and all day long
Crossed and recrossed the waving field,
Stopping at noon to eat their fare
Of bacon, cheese, and sweetened rum.
And scarcely had the meadow hay
Scented the barns from loft to floor
When barley must be harvested
And sent to mill.

'T was August now ;
The flax still ripened in the sun,
The fruit still hung upon the boughs,
And Ursula with restless hands
Toyed with the sampler which had lain

Unfinished long. Across the room
Her Cousin Matthew held his peace.
“You find it lonely,” she had said,
Half echoing his last remark.
“I find it very dull and drear,”
He answered her; “I sometimes hoped
To find companionship in books,
But they are cold, so cold and grim.”
He rose the while he spoke, and she,
Intent upon his words, forgot
Her work and listened as he said:
“The heart alone is quick and warm.”



PON a mid-stream mossy rock,
Encircled by the checkered flow
Of water, curbed until it foamed
And crested like a stormy sea,
Sat Ursula. The tilting leaves
That cradled each soft falling breeze
Left flickering shadows on the stream
And on her face; the flecks of light
That filtered through shone golden brown
Upon the calmer water's bed

And touched the red that warmed her cheeks
Into a kindred hue. For thus
Does Nature like a mother soul
Assimilate all life with hers,
Attune all measures with her own.

She sat in quiet revery,
Half heedless of the murmuring,
The babble and the twittering
That intermingled with the wind.
“’Tis strange,” she said, “it is so strange.”
And as she spoke, her thought was lost
In musing on her own low voice ;
She hearkened as it echoed back
Along the pathway to the mind
That gave it birth.

“ It is so strange
To be alone. These eighteen years
The mystery of things to me
Was never strange, for as a child
I was a part of all the wide

Weird universe, a part of each
Law's rite incomprehensible —
So simple that they each sufficed
For my companionship; and now" —
She reached her arms above the stream
And turned her pink palms toward the sun,
And her white fingers, orange rimmed,
Slowly unlocked their trellised bond
As she exclaimed, "It all is strange."

Far down the dusty noonday road
A sound of jarring voices rose,
And Ursula heard running steps
And taunts and flouts. Then drawing near
And standing on the tangled weeds
That crept into the yellow sand
In spite of hoof and tire and heel,
She saw a motley company:
The portly constable came first,
Knitting his brows to hide the sun
That stole beneath his Monmouth hat

Which rose three-cornered on his great
White goat-hair wig ; and by his side
A meek and gentle minister
Who preached God's word from out his
heart

And witnessed it in every line
Of his pale face ; and after him
Unflinching followers who sang
The saving grace of penitence
Nor cared for heat nor dust nor jeers.
Mile after mile the little band
Had marched—men clad in silk and lace
With men in linsey-woolsey stuff,
Women in hoops too wide for pews
Or trails that trolloped in the mud,
And rosy girls in homespun gowns.

Through Branford, Durham, Hartford,
went
The banished minister of God
From constable to constable,

A branded "vagrant" by the law
Because he dared to preach the word
In parish borders not his own.

" For those who sang of sunny days
And those who sorrowed he had cheer ;
Yet could he walk through lonely ways
And find communion ever near.

" The world was sweeter for his care,
The heights were won he sought to win ;
For love through him made all things fair,
And all things fair through love are kin."

At nightfall when the stars came out
He stood beneath the creaking sign
That gave each inn a name, and there
Exhorted those who gathered round,
Lashing their consciences with truth
Till contrite tears coursed down their cheeks.
When his weak frame could do no more
He bade good Philemon Robbins pray—

Pray for the magistrates who sat
A twelvemonth to discover crime
In what he taught at Branford church ;
Pray, too, for that devoted band
Who like himself would not permit
The stranger in their gates to go
An exile without hearts to cheer
The way, and ask a benison
Upon the upturned faces there,
The palsied pauper in his rags,
The red man in his cloak of skins,
The haggard soldier from the wars
Slow dying with the Cuban plague,
The country folk for miles around,
And, too, the landlord rubicund
And wise.

While Ursula stood near,
Half comprehending this great strife
That burned in every village street
And blazed abroad the bitterness

That cast out love, she turned again
To her first thoughts and found in them
The balm of peace.

 And while she mused
Her father came and stood with her.
His scarlet broadcloth coat, its front
Adorned with buttons bright as gold
Set in long vellum button-holes,
His cuffs of lace, his ruffles starched
Like snow, the cockade in his hat —
These all proclaimed his dignity.
He touched her hand, and pressing it
Said, “Come, my child, the day is warm.”
And as they walked men bowed the head
And women courtesied to him.



HE sound of voices died away,
But overhead complainingly
The bluebird flew with whirr of
wings,
The tree-toad trilled a coming
storm,

And from the parching meadow grass
The katydid proclaimed the heat.
"The law is often perfected
By lawlessness," her father said ;

“ Their overzeal, their ecstasy,
Their bold assurance that the truth
Is theirs alone, will strain the cords
Which gird our freedom of belief,
But when their hearts are calm again
These slackened cords will bind no more.
A tidal wave sets wider bounds
To hem a tranquil sea.”

“ His face,”

Cried Ursula, “ his face was pale
And marked with pain ; I did so grieve
For him.” Her eyelids filled with tears,
And his kind hand upon her cheek
Bespoke his tender sympathy.

Silence, that husbandman of thought,
Kept equal ministry with each,
The grave chief justice pondering
On weightier matters than the law.
A solitary darkening cloud

Eclipsed the sun, and thunder crashed
And rumbled ominously on.

When they had gone a little way
They stopped beneath a farmer's shed
Whose terraced sides were witnesses
To their first century of rain.
Each shingle, fluted deep along
The softer grain with sharp-edged channels,
And hollowed out beneath the drip
From tier to tier, was stained with years
And shaded to a silver gray.
Then through her memory there ran
An ancient song of childhood days :

The dew in the grass
Hung pearls on its spears,
And we loved them, alas !
Till the sun in its pass
Decoyed them away.
But the sun when it seres

In the heat of the day
Let them fall on the grass
In a shower of tears.

When the first burst of rain had come
And left a quiet time for speech
He said: "I see that wistfulness
Which tells me of your heart's unrest;
That wistfulness that finds no calm
In pleasures that once gave content;
But looking into unseen ways
Yearns ever for the promised joys,
And ever yearning teaches you
To hope. I see new dreams that live
In other worlds so far away
Eyes cannot follow, but must rest
Limpid, letting the soul look through
To find the heart's new-born desire.
I would not trespass by one word
Too much, dear child; but keep good cheer
And know that its fulfilment means

A peace that has not been before.
Your happiness is our first thought
And what you wish is our intent.”
She pressed his hand in gratitude
Nor dared to trust her voice to speak.



HE is most truly fair to-day,
He said, who stood beside his
horse,
Ready to mount but looking back
To where she stood upon the steps,
Crowned by an overhanging vine
Whose purple clusters touched her hair.
She must be very fair, he mused,
And then he glanced at her and saw
Her slender figure, clad in white,

In silhouette against the door,
Erect, with girlish dignity,
Yet burgeoning with tenderness.

I would that she were mine, he thought,
Were mine to minister to her,
Were mine that I might weep with her,
That I might feel her tears for me
In my distress, were mine to fold
My dreams about in happy hours,
To share the silence of great joy.

But she who stood there could not hear.
The afternoon was wearing on,
The mist that fled before the sun
Lay under trees and in the glades,
And crept into the open fields,
Hiding the grain with wreaths of white.
The horse was restive for the start,
And Matthew stroked his arching neck
And patted him.

'T was Ursula

Who spoke: "What said you, Cousin Matthew?"

He looked at her in mute surprise
And wondered if she read his thought.
But no, there was no change in her.
He answered: "Nothing, Ursula,"
And mounting, waved her his farewell.

The road to Lyme is long and lone.
He pondered in his solitude;
And first her form appeared to him
With all its subtle beauteousness;
Her snowy dress before his eyes
Dimmed all the passing scenery —
The moon upon the eastern hills,
And its red image in the stream
Below.

Her gentle eyes shut out
The evening sky, and seeing naught
But her he knew that Ursula
Was everything and all to him.

And while he journeyed he resolved
To claim her heart when he should come
Again.

But when the moon had waned,
And he had come to stand before
Her radiance of youth and health
He faltered. Thus again it was
His lips were silent while his heart
Would bid him speak; and she again
Spoke first: "What said you, Cousin Mat-
thew?"

There was a little wistfulness
In what she said that puzzled him,
He knew not why. But he replied:
"I did say nothing, Ursula."
He fretted at the passing hours
And longed to tell her of his hope.
Must life go by unsatisfied?
Are dreams so cherished but to die?
Another day had dawned at last,

And Matthew riding toward the door
Heard her light step upon the stairs
And entering he found her there.
She leaned upon the banister,
With fingers clasped about the spindles ;
And tears he saw were lingering
To dim her eyes.

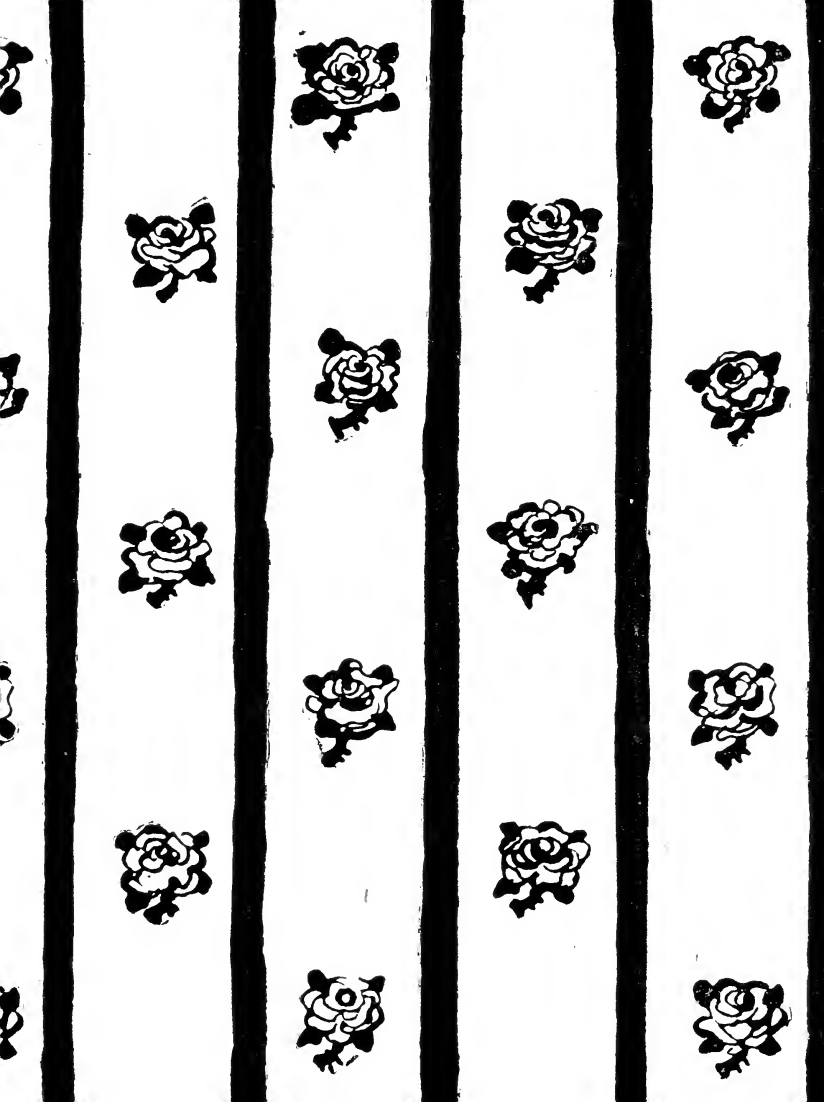
His pulse was quick,
And yet he checked his eagerness.
“ It surely cannot be,” he thought,
“ It could not be that she would care.”
The clock beat loudly through the hall
To make the stillness yet more still.
And Ursula, with steady voice
That trembled ere the words were done,
Began : “ What said you, Cousin Matthew ? ”
And he, as one who comes almost
To comprehend, said thoughtfully :
“ I did say nothing, Ursula.”
The color faded from her cheeks ;

She spoke so timidly and low
He scarcely heard her plaintive words :
“ ’T is time you did.”

A little while
Had passed, and hearing no one move,
The grave chief justice looked within.
He saw her still upon the stairs,
Sobbing as gently as a child,
And Matthew gazing lovingly
Upon her face and holding fast
Her hands in his.

And seeing this
He turned away and left them there.





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